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White House Drops the Press-Restrictions It Had Proposed to Crack Down on Leaks

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WASHINGTON—The White House has dropped its controversial new requirement that government officials get advance approval of and file reports on press interviews at which classified national security issues might arise.

National security adviser William Clark omitted any reference to the controls on interviews yesterday in issuing new procedures for handling classified information. The procedures were issued to carry out President Reagan's Jan. 12 directive ordering measures to curb leaks to the press about classified foreign policy and defense matters.

Mr. Clark also left out the Jan. 12 threat to use "all legal methods" to pinpoint the sources of leaks, saying only that the Attorney General would study the effectiveness of current practices.

Instead, the paper focused solely on procedures for carrying out the portion of the Jan. 12 directive that minimized the number of officials with access to classified data from the National Security Council.

Chief White House spokesman David Gergen said Mr. Clark's statement of procedures supersedes the Jan. 12 presidential order, and noted that the controls on interviews aren't part of the new policy.

Other White House officials said Mr. Clark had been convinced since Jan. 12, by reporters and government press officers, that the controls on interviews would squeeze off the flow of legitimate information and interpretation to the press by making officials afraid to talk to reporters.

The White House officials said that without the restrictions on interviews or specific new penalties for leaking information, the new policy is largely a reiteration of long-standing practices for handling classified data.

Mr. Clark's memorandum declares that the information to be protected consists of classified portions of documents and deliberations of the National Security Council and interagency groups and committees established by it.

The council, a White House body, is composed of the President and Vice President, the secretaries of State and Defense, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Other Cabinet members attend various council sessions, however, and numerous lower-level White House and agency officials work on its documents and may participate in its meetings.

To protect National Security Council information, Mr. Clark directed that government agencies restrict access to such data to "the absolute minimum." Documents containing such information must be accompanied by a numbered cover sheet warning against disclosure and requiring the signatures of recipients on a promise to cooperate in investigating any leaks of the information.

However, the memorandum didn't refer to a section of the Jan. 12 directive that required advance approval of all press contacts in which such information might come up, and that ordered any official interviewed to write a report on the session.

Those new requirements had caused fear among many officials and some had begun refusing to talk to reporters on any subject. Their reticence was reinforced when it was disclosed that senior Pentagon officials were forced to take lie-detector tests in an effort to track down a leak concerning budget projections.

The reporters and press officers had urged Mr. Clark to distinguish between the occasional release of genuine state secrets to reporters and the much more common practice of answering press requests for details and interpretations of policy questions.

This point of view was opposed by other officials, who insist that broad curbs on press contacts are the only way to bar premature or unauthorized disclosure of policies or data. They contend that such disclosures have made foreign policy hard to conduct and have embarrassed the President.

Reporters still could find it tougher to get information, despite the softening of the new policy. A more restrictive psychology probably will continue for a while, and the administration will continue to track down leaks vigorously. Also, the Attorney General could recommend tougher penalties that might dissuade people from talking to the press. And a separate policy review of how information is classified may lead to broadening the government's secrecy provisions.